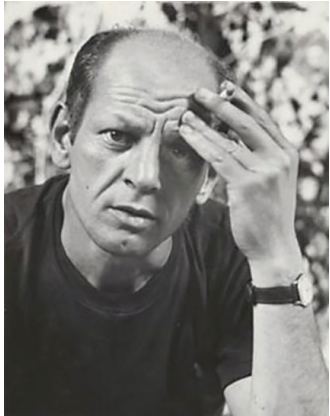


Jackson Pollock

a biography



Paul Jackson Pollock was born in 1912 in Cody, Wyoming, the youngest of five sons to Stella and LeRoy Pollock. His family was itinerant, leaving Wyoming less than a year after his birth to travel throughout Arizona and California in search of work. They eventually settled in Southern California, although his father often lived away from the family to work various jobs. In the absence of his father, Pollock looked to his brothers as role models, particularly his eldest brother, Charles. Charles studied at art schools in Los Angeles and became a painter, and the young Pollock was fascinated by the art magazines and periodicals which he would send back. Jackson followed in Charles' footsteps, choosing to study painting at Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles in 1928. In 1930, he quit school and, seeking to solidify his career as an artist, again followed Charles, this time to New York City, where Charles had been studying with the painter Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) at The Art Students League.

Pollock also began studying with Benton at The Art Students League, where he was a devoted pupil. Benton was a respected painter associated with the movement known as American Regionalism, which relied on naturalistic painting techniques to depict scenes of life in rural America, particularly the Midwest and the South. As such, he spurned European Modernism and abstraction, in stark contrast to the direction that Pollock's career would later take. However, at the time Pollock accepted Benton's Regionalist influence, painting several pastoral scenes, including *Going West* (ca.1934–1935), which harkened back to his upbringing in the Western United States. He also learned from Benton's techniques and philosophy, particularly his teacher's declaration that "art is born not in preconception or dreaming but in work," an idea that is reflected in Pollock's later drip paintings, which emphasize the painting process over predetermined imagery.

Early in his career, Pollock struggled to find success as an artist, living hand-to-mouth and suffering from alcoholism. Adding to his difficulties, Benton and Charles left New York in 1935. Pollock received relief that same year after finding employment with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project, which provided artists who had become unemployed during the Great Depression the opportunity to work on public arts projects, such as murals. The artist also studied briefly in the experimental workshop of Mexican mural artist David Alfaro

Siqueiros (1896–1974) in 1936, where he was introduced to the use of enamel paint and techniques such as dripping and flinging paint onto the canvas. He was also influenced by the large scale and focus on emotional expression in the works of Siqueiros and other Mexican mural artists. Between the mid-1930s and the mid-1940s, Pollock formed several important connections that would later bolster his success. In 1943, while working as a maintenance man at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (now called the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), he met Peggy Guggenheim (1898–1979), a prominent benefactor of abstract and modern art in the United States. She was impressed with Pollock's work from the early 1940s, which was influenced by European modernism, especially Surrealism. These paintings also incorporated "totemic" images inspired by indigenous art forms from Africa and the Americas in imitation of European painters, such as Pablo Picasso (1881–1973),



who used similar imagery. Guggenheim contracted with Pollock through 1947 to provide him with a stipend allowing him to focus exclusively on painting. She also helped to find Pollock and his wife Lee Krasner (1908–1984)—a fellow abstract artist who he married in 1945—a home in East Hampton, New York.

Converting a shed on his property into a studio, Pollock began to explore new techniques. In 1947, he developed his now famous "drip" technique, which entailed laying an unstretched raw canvas on the floor and using sticks, trowels, and knives to drip, splatter, and pour paint directly from the can onto the canvas. These works elevated the gestural quality of the artist's process rather than identifiable imagery. Pollock first displayed these paintings in January 1948, and they quickly garnered attention. In August 1949, *Life* magazine published an article about him which explored the prominent art critic Clement Greenberg's (1909–1994) proposal that Pollock was "the greatest living painter in the United States,"



helping to increase his fame beyond the world of abstract art in New York.

In the summer of 1950, Pollock produced three of his most ambitious paintings, including *Autumn Rhythm* (*Number 30*), and in the fall, Hans Namuth (1915–1990) photographed and filmed the artist in the process of painting, adding to the artist's fame. Towards the end of 1950, Pollock suffered a mental breakdown and slid back into alcoholism, which he had brought under control during a period of success at the end of the 1940s. Known for his volatile temper and propensity for violent outbursts, Pollock's deteriorating state isolated him from friends and other members of the New York art scene, while paradoxically his fame among the general public reached its peak.

Coinciding with these events, in 1951, Pollock changed his aesthetic, abandoning pure abstraction and emphasizing abstracted references to human and animal forms. However, these works failed to elicit a significant response, and the artist's productivity declined significantly. Between 1953 and his death, Pollock created fewer than ten new paintings, most of which involved revisiting a technique or style he had used earlier in his career. At the same time, his relationship with Krasner deteriorated due to his alcoholism and infidelity. On August 11, 1956, while Krasner was visiting friends in Europe, Pollock crashed his car into a tree while driving drunk near their house. Pollock and another passenger, Edith Metzger, were killed. Four months later, The Museum of Modern Art in New York held a memorial retrospective of his work. Despite his controversial aesthetics and personality, Pollock remained a symbol of the Abstract Expressionist movement, thanks in large part to the work of his widow, Krasner, who helped to ensure his legacy and manage his estate after his death.

IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Jackson Pollock, 1950. Photograph by Hans Namuth. Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona © 1991 Hans Namuth Estate; Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956), *Going West*, ca.1934–1935, oil on fiberboard, 15 1/8 x 20 3/4 in. (38.3 x 52.7 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Thomas Hart Benton, 1973.149.1; Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956), *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, 1950, enamel on canvas, 105 x 207 in. (266.7 x 525.8 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, George A. Hearn Fund, 1957.57.92

Timeline

1910

1912 Jackson Pollock is born on January 28 in Cody, Wyoming

1920

1928 Enters Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles, California

1930

1930 Moves to New York to study with Thomas Hart Benton at The Art Students League

1935

1935 Begins working for the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project

1940

1943 Meets Peggy Guggenheim, who gives him a stipend to allow him to focus on painting

1947

1947 Creates his first drip paintings; paints *Galaxy*

1950

1950 Paints in front of the camera for Hans Namuth

1951

1951 Changes style to move away from pure abstraction

1955

1955 Creates his final two paintings

1956

1956 Dies on August 11 near his East Hampton, New York, home

Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956), *Easter and the Totem*, 1953, oil on canvas, 82 1/8 x 58 in. (208.6 x 147.3 cm), The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Lee Krasner in memory of Jackson Pollock, 425.980



Jackson Pollock
(American, 1912–1956)

Galaxy
1947

oil and aluminum paint on canvas, 43 1/2 x 34 in. (110.5 x 86.4 cm)

Gift of Miss Peggy Guggenheim, 1949.164

Photograph © Bruce M. White, 2019

Discussion Questions

How does *Galaxy* represent a transitional phase in Jackson Pollock's painting style?

How is Pollock's work representative of Abstract Expressionism?

How do you describe Abstract Expressionists' painting methodologies?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's related academic standards and lesson plans.

Jackson Pollock's painting *Galaxy* represents an important shift in the artist's style. Before 1947, Pollock created thickly painted works that feature subtle symbolic motifs and "totemic" figures inspired by Surrealism and the work of artists such as Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). Pollock shifted his emphasis to pure abstraction in 1947, creating his now iconic drip paintings by pouring and splattering paint directly onto the canvas. *Galaxy* provides direct evidence of this transition.

Galaxy began as a work titled *The Little King*, which Pollock painted in 1946, using vaguely symbolic, thickly outlined shapes in blue, yellow, orange, and green. A year later he returned to *The Little King* and overpainted it using his drip method, pouring white and silver aluminum paint over the original image, which is still partially visible beneath skeins of splattered paint *Galaxy* thus provides a unique record of the shift in Pollock's aesthetics and methods away from his earlier Surrealist-influenced work to the entirely abstract drip paintings for which he is well-known.

Galaxy is part of a loose grouping of four paintings that Pollock created in the summer and autumn of 1947. The other paintings in this "series"—titled *Reflection of the Big Dipper*, *Shooting Star*, and *Comet*—also reference outer space and cosmic phenomena and employ the same method of splattering and pouring paint directly onto the canvas. With these works, Pollock introduced a gestural approach which emphasized the movements of the artist as he applied paint to the canvas. The viewer is thus presented with evidence of the artist's creative process rather than a recreation of reality or a specific image.



Paintings like *Galaxy* helped propel Pollock to fame and earned him the support of collectors, galleries, and fellow artists. *Galaxy* was originally purchased by Peggy Guggenheim (1898–1979), one of Pollock's earliest supporters. She was a prominent benefactor of the growing community of abstract artists in New York in the 1930s and 1940s. She helped to organize several exhibitions for Pollock at prominent art galleries in New York and abroad. In 1949, she donated *Galaxy* to Joslyn Art Museum in an effort to expand access to abstract art beyond New York.

IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT): Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956), *The Little King*, c. 1946, oil on canvas. Exhibited in 1946 but repainted the following year and retitled *Galaxy*. (Black and white image); Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956), *Reflection of the Big Dipper*, 1947, paint on canvas, 43 3/4 x 36 1/4 in. (111 x 92 cm), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Gift of Peggy Guggenheim, A2971; Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956), *Shooting Star*, 1947, paint on canvas, 38 x 24 in. (99 x 61 cm), National Museum of Fine Arts, Buenos Aires, 7983; Jackson Pollock (American, 1912–1956), *Comet*, 1947, oil on canvas, 37 1/8 x 17 7/8 in. (94.3 x 45.5 cm), Ludwigshafen, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum

The New York School and Abstract Expressionism



Jackson Pollock was a member of a loose association of New York-based artists who flourished from the early 1940s to the mid-1950s and have come to be known as the Abstract Expressionists. These artists broke with formal conventions and traditional subject matter, creating works which were meant to be a reflection of the artist's psyche and convey universal inner truths. These artists coalesced in the New York avant-garde scene during the 1930s, when many of them found work with the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Art Project during the Great Depression. By the 1940s they began to develop their unique techniques and conceptual approaches.

Key to the development of the Abstract Expressionism was the increased access to European modern art in the 1930s. The Museum of Living Art, The Museum of Modern Art, and the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, which opened in 1927, 1929, and 1939, respectively, displayed growing selections of art by European avant-garde artists. The young Abstract Expressionists were also exposed to the most significant movements of European modernism through temporary

exhibitions, including *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936) and *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (1936–1937), as well as retrospectives of artists such as Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). Several European artists also moved to the United States and taught art, most prominently Hans Hoffman (1880–1966), who taught many of the Abstract Expressionists. The Abstract Expressionists were particularly influenced by Surrealism, especially the concept of "automatic art," or art created by allowing the subconscious mind, rather than conscious movements, to guide the art making process. They also followed European modernism by looking to indigenous art from the Americas, Africa, and Asia, in search of ways to tap into a universal human experience.

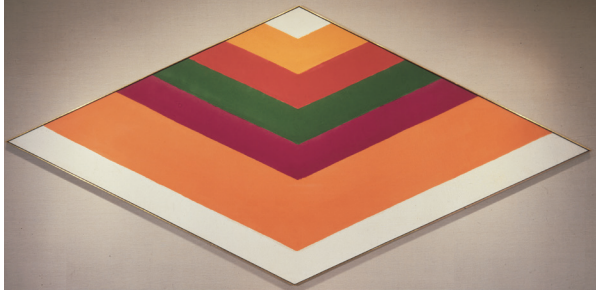
Abstract Expressionism diverged into two main categories: gestural art and Color Field art. Artists working in the gestural idiom focused on the dynamic movement of the art making process, as exemplified in the work of Pollock. Through his drip method, he emphasized the movements and gestures of the painting process, with each trail or splatter of paint on the canvas evincing the particular action which the artist took to create it. Other artists who worked in a similar vein include Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) and Pollock's wife, Krasner (1908–1984).

The gestural marks which artists in this mode used were meant to serve as evidence of the work's physical creation, and thus allow the viewer to come into contact with the artist's authentic identity.

The other main group, known as Color Field painters, focused on the expressive potential of color. Artists working in this idiom included Mark Rothko (1903–1970), Barnett Newman (1905–1970), and Kenneth Noland (1924–2010), who all created large-scale works based on simplified fields of color. Noland's painting *Cirium* (1964), in Joslyn's collection, is representative of the style in which these artists worked, consisting of fields of saturated color arranged in a chevron pattern on a diamond shaped canvas that measures eight and a half feet tall by eighteen feet wide. The artists intended for their works to be viewed in small, enclosed spaces so that their paintings could envelop viewers and allow them to connect with the work in a visceral manner. By simplifying their pictorial language to focus on color and painting on a massive scale, the Color Field painters sought to elicit in the viewer a cerebral, emotional reaction to color itself, independent of the societal or cultural connotations a particular color might carry. The Color Field painters thus shared the gesture painters' desire to hone in on emotional responses and create intimate viewing experiences.

Gestural and Color Field painting had a profound effect on the global art scene following World War II. As Europe recovered from the war, the Abstract Expressionists demonstrated that American artists could not only absorb the tenets of modernism, but also innovate new and radical ideas. By the late 1950s, the art world's focus shifted decisively from Paris to New York. Traveling exhibitions featuring Abstract Expressionist painting became popular, while artists such as Pollock enjoyed attention in the popular press. The emergence of the Abstract Expressionist movement thus marked a watershed moment in the history of modern American art, not only solidifying New York's position as the world's premier city for modern and avant-garde art, but also introducing stylistic and conceptual innovations which continue to resonate in the art world today.

IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): American Abstract Expressionists. From left (rear) Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt, Hedda Sterne;(next row) Richard Pousette-Dart, William Bazotes, Jackson Pollock, Clifford Still, Robert Motherwell, Bradley Walker Tomlin; (seated) Theodoros Stamos, Jimmy Ernst, Barnett Newman, James Brooks, and Mark Rothko. Photo by Nina Leen/The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images; Kenneth Noland (American, 1924–2010), *Cirium*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 104 3/8 x 219 in. (265.11 x 556.26 cm), Joslyn Art Museum, Museum purchase with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts Purchase Plan Grant and matching funds from the Joslyn Women's Association and the Art Acquisition Endowment Fund, 1978.266, © 2020 Estate of Kenneth Noland / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



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Lee Krasner

Lee Krasner was born Lena Krassner on October 27, 1908, to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents in Brooklyn, New York. As a young woman, she received a thorough education in art, studying at The Cooper Union and The Art Students League. From 1928 to 1932 she attended the National Academy of Design in New York, where she received a strong formal education in artistic methods. Like many artists at the time, Krasner found employment during the Great Depression with the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Art Project in 1934. She returned to art school in 1937, studying with the German modernist Hans Hoffman (1880–1966), whose experience in the modern art world in Paris motivated him to teach the methods and ideals of European modernism to Krasner and her fellow students. After this, she changed her style from a naturalistic and figurative idiom to one informed by Cubist artists such as Pablo Picasso (1881–1973).

In 1941 she met Jackson Pollock. At the time, Krasner was well-established in the New York avant-garde art scene, while he was still struggling to earn recognition. Krasner saw potential in Pollock's creativity and emotional intensity and became one of his most ardent supporters. They married in 1945 and moved to East Hampton, New York, where both artists sought to further develop their methods and aesthetics. Inspired by the intuitive and spontaneous nature of Pollock's work, Krasner abandoned some of the intense formalism of her earlier paintings. On the other hand, Pollock relied on Krasner's discernment and judgement to temper his erratic personality and made use of her connections in the art world to further his career. Krasner's work from this period is characterized by free abstraction and another of Krasner's methods involved revising her earlier paintings, even revisiting the same work more than once.

A successful 1955 exhibition at a Manhattan gallery cemented Krasner's reputation as one of the foremost abstract artists of her generation. At the same, however, her relationship with Pollock was deteriorating. After his death in 1956, she moved into his studio and began making paintings that reflected her emotional and psychological turmoil. In the 1960s and 1970s, Krasner enjoyed great popular and critical success, mounting retrospectives at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1965 and the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1973. Coupled with strong representation in commercial galleries, these exhibitions helped to alter the public perception of her as "Mrs. Jackson Pollock" and bring her broader recognition for her own work. She continued to be a strong supporter of her late husband's work, helping to ensure his legacy and public image and manage his estate. Krasner died on June 19, 1984, in New York. After her death, her estate was used to help found The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, which provides grants to young aspiring artists to allow them to focus on their careers.

1980 Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, 1950. Photography by Hans Namuth. © 1991 Hans Namuth Estate



JACKSON POLLOCK
American, 1912–1956

GALAXY
1947, oil and aluminum paint on canvas
43 1/2 x 34 in. (110.5 x 86.4 cm)

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Gift of Miss Peggy Guggenheim, 1949.164
Photograph © Bruce M. White, 2019